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VOL 9 • ISSUE 4

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ILONA BONIWELL

Positive Psychology: let's get happy

Liz Hall talks to Positive Psychologist Dr Ilona Boniwell, founder of the first masters in Positive Psychology in Europe and of the European Network of Positive Psychology, author, teacher, director, speaker and parent of five children. Not surprisingly, she feels well-qualified to discuss work/life balance. She stresses its importance and the role of coaching in helping others understand their choices

HAPPINESS IS...

It's refreshing interviewing Dr Ilona Boniwell. Funny, bright and warm, she's happy to share that despite being a world-renowned expert on resilience and Positive Psychology (PP), she hasn't got it all sorted.

I don't know whether to be disappointed or relieved. I'll opt for relieved, considering that optimism is rated so highly in the PP movement.

When we did the interview, Ilona was emerging from weeks of burning the midnight oil, completing validation paperwork for her latest brainchild, the International MSc in Applied Pos Psych (I-MAPP), which she launches in Paris and Cambridge this autumn. Uniquely, the programme offers students the choice of 12 modules, including coaching, and education.

Ilona already teaches at the École Centrale, Paris, including a module on Positive Leadership and on the Masters in Transformation and Innovation.

In addition, she lectures and speaks on PP and resilience widely, writes and edits books, does media work, including writing a monthly

column for *Psychologies* magazine on modern family life and consults as a director of consultancy Positran, including advising the Bhutanese government. All this, and she is raising five children, four of whom are teenagers, aged 14, 15, 16 and 17. The latter means her weekends are not always restful.

"I do feel myself quite qualified to discuss work/life balance!

Three of the teenagers are boys, and you have to deal with multiple issues frequently at the weekend, yet still perform once you're back at work. On Monday morning, I have to teach PP."

So is she good at resilience herself?

"I am, but sometimes the day after! I bounce back very quickly. What helps? I don't do meditation – when I wake up, I have to dress, feed and get the baby to the crèche, but I do pottering, which is a bit like walking meditation, to get myself back together and to be able to perform.

"The reality is that we have to be realistic about which interventions we can do best. The trick is not the intervention, but finding one that

can stick to make a difference. We're all good if we go off on a retreat for a week, but how many of us, especially those with real issues around work/life balance, can do that?"

Another intervention she uses is being appreciative – this can work better for some than being grateful, she says: "But again, it's making it a habit that makes the difference. And that's why coaching is essential."

Long-term coaching

Habit formation takes time, she stresses. "I'm shifting from my view that short-term solution-focused coaching is best. When you're dealing with resilience and stress, it's the long-term coaching of one to three years that makes the difference. Very often, coaching is very helpful in the short term with goal achievement, changing direction and so on, but when you're dealing with a crisis lasting years, for example, a boss they can't fire, family demands, a divorce, kids to pay for, I think it's the long-term coaching that makes a difference for long-term habit formation.

“The trick is not the intervention, but finding one that can stick to make a difference. We’re all good if we go off on a retreat for a week, but how many of us, especially those with real issues around work/life balance, can do that?”

“It’s difficult, but no matter how much we believe 10 weeks will make a difference, it [often] won’t.”

So, for example, Ilona might see a client for intensive coaching over two to three months, then monthly for one to three years.

A string of ‘firsts’

The I-MAPP programme is one of an impressive string of ‘firsts’ for Ilona. She gained 1st class honours in her BSc (Hons) in Psychology at the Open University in 2000. She founded and was the first chair of the European Network of Positive Psychology, and she organised the first European Congress of Positive Psychology in June 2002 (Winchester), starting a successful tradition of bi-annual events.

Ilona trained as a coach while doing her PhD – first taking Newcastle College’s diploma. Her initial academic posting, after completing her PhD, was at Oxford Brookes University, as senior lecturer in adult professional and lifelong learning on its MA in Coaching and Mentoring.

She was then headhunted by the University of East London (UEL) “who got excited about me creating a masters in PP.

“I was the first lecturer in PP in the UK and in 2006, I created the first masters in PP in Europe, the second in the world after the University of Pennsylvania.”

Her research interests include the evaluation of coaching effectiveness and studying the mechanisms underlying coaching interventions; perceived time use;

time perspective; wellbeing and positive education.

Proudest moments

“I am very proud of getting the first masters off the ground, and even prouder of adapting the second to the needs of students and the [evolving] state of PP.”

She continued running the (UEL) masters until 2012: “It was very popular: we had 60 students and 40 distance learning students each year.”

Between 2006 and 2012, she did many other things, including consultancy, resilience programmes, research, including articles, and into the applications of PP, but “always keeping coaching as a tangible outlet”. She also wrote the first of six books.

“I’m very proud of the first book: *Positive Psychology in a Nutshell* (PWBC 2008), which took me three months of very intense work, because I wrote it in the middle of a divorce. I wrote it as therapy for myself, stopping my PhD for three months. It was the first popular PP book in the UK, not in a pop psychology sense, but in a semi-academic sense.”

She is also pleased with the most recent book she has been involved in: *The Oxford Book of Happiness* (OUP 2013), which she co-edited. It’s a vast tome that includes coaching material.

The foreword was written by the King of Bhutan. Getting him to do this was something of a coup, particularly as there were only two weeks to go before the

deadline when Ilona asked him. “As I’d been advising the Bhutanese government on happiness-based policies, I did have some contact. But as far as kings are concerned, two weeks is a pretty quick turnaround. So I wrote a foreword for him.

“The following morning an email came back saying that the King of Bhutan is an Oxford scholar who writes all his own publications and the foreword will reach you for the deadline!”

I suggest this is yet more evidence that Ilona has a ‘why not?’ attitude. “Yes, I do. I try a lot of things; not all of them work, many don’t, but some do.”

Why does she think she is like this? “I follow instinct. My goals are not external; they’re really internal. It’s the right thing in the right place at the right time, and when I feel it’s really the right thing to do, it becomes a goal and deeply grounded.

With the I-MAPP, for example, it is the right time to take this step of PP becoming professionalised.”

Being trusted by others helps, though. People who have inspired her include Professor David Rose, head of department at UEL. “He’s the best example of a British person: wicked humour, very serious, but extremely open-minded and encouraging. He gave me a free hand and believed in me to do the right thing.”

Another is Dr Tatiana Bachkirova, from Oxford Brookes, who is a very close friend. “She is really resilient, open-minded, with



a critical intelligence and passion and dedication to her work.”

When Ilona asked her husband what makes her her, he highlighted her courage to follow her instincts, for example, “following love all over the world, and to take risks, although she says she ‘does think a lot’”.

Half-Latvian, half-Russian, Ilona has lived in countries, including Latvia, Russia, Algeria and England, emigrating to the latter when she was 20 “for the love of a British man”, and moving to France three years ago. She speaks English, Russian and French.

Route into PP

In 1999, when she was looking to organise the first student conference, she asked people to

suggest interesting topics.

Strengths and PP expert Alex Linley’s name came up. Linley was very supportive and in 2000, she organised the first PP conference in Europe at student level.

“There was a wow moment – it was the psychological approach that clicked. [I thought] this is exactly what is missing. It made perfect sense, and I realised this was exactly what I wanted to do.

“Did it come from nowhere? Probably not. One of my favourite psychological books was Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, so there was a base interest.”

The following year was the British Psychological Society’s centenary and Martin Seligman was invited to speak. Because Ilona already had an interest in PP,

someone suggested she have coffee with Seligman.

“From 2001, my direction changed. From 1999, my passion was PP, but there was no real job. At that point, I was a clinical psychologist. But that meeting made it real. I formed a good relationship with Seligman, and I travelled to the US to learn PP.”

She particularly liked that PP was a scientific yet tangible approach, and with a future.

Fifteen years on, her vision for PP is: “To see continued professionalisation in terms of applied PP – in coaching, in education, in organisations, in management, and so on. And the continued integration of PP and mainstream psychology. We’re seeing a lot more collaboration. On the one hand, there is differentiation as far as applied PP is concerned, and on the other, more integrating and merging as far as the evidence base and knowledge is concerned.”

PP in coaching

“PP has always been present in coaching but [before] just from a theoretical basis. The next step was taking PP theory and [coming up with] interventions, but they [can be] limited.

“Gratitude exercises for executives aren’t going to work. Some of the interventions come across as quite narrow and common-sensical for complex situations, especially in the business context. I could see coaches who would say, ‘yep, a) not sure I’m going to use it, and b) it’s not really rocket science’.

“So with the VIA [strengths] inventory, for example, people complete the questionnaire, but when you ask them about using their strengths in a real way, they look at you with a blank face.

“When you’re dealing with resilience and stress, it’s the long-term coaching of one to three years that makes the difference”



“Now I can see six or seven people globally [Tony Grant, Carol Kaufmann, Lucy Ryan, Robin Biswas-Diener, Suzy Green and herself] who are taking coaching PP to the next level, taking the theoretical base and creatively making it really practical with really concrete exercises and tools, and applying it to the coaching process.”

Ilona gives the example of the Strengths Cards developed by UK-based Ryan. She has developed her own version.

“These are a good introduction to strengths and for helping people look at which strengths they’re using currently, and so on. It’s something very tangible, real and useable. The future for coaching PP is about continuing to develop tangible coaching interventions... change is coming. We have to think outside the box and apply PP to the real world.

“My personal plans after I-MAPP are to continue working in applying PP to coaching and for leadership resilience.”

She is launching another module outside of I-MAPP on coaching PP, and also on creativity and innovation coaching.

“I will continue developing interventions. Positran is going to be doing more coaching and training product development.

“And I will continue working closer with PP in education, especially in France and Japan. Here, in France, the education system has really restrictive qualities. Psychologically, it offers

no support to children with depression and deep anxiety.”

She says that although Japan and France are very strong academically, there is little development in the emotional and cognitive non-academic arenas. Data shows that wellbeing and interest nosedives once children enter secondary school, only rising again in the last year.

“There is a real need [for intervention]. It’s a really big problem and a really big passion of mine... our own children, who are all bright, are bored to death at school and their only recompense is friendship.”

Ilona is currently working on four new books for French publishers: *Positive Leadership* (forthcoming in 2014, Payot), *Motivated Adolescents* (in press, Odile Jacob), *Positive Psychology Coaching Toolbox* (forthcoming in 2014, Dunod) and *Positive Education Toolbox* (forthcoming in 2014, Dunod).

She teaches in Japan twice a year. “There’s lots of interest in resilience in business and schools. I’ve developed a programme for school kids, and we’re seeing good results – increased resilience and decreased depression.”

She was the main consultant on resilience for a Japanese TV channel (NHK TV), which is Japan’s equivalent of the BBC.

In Japan, this concept is new and awareness of resilience is only just starting to grow. The School of Positive Psychology, Singapore, is currently using the SPARK

programme created by Ilona in Japanese local schools.

Are we seeing more need, generally, for resilience? “Yes, we are. In Europe, the crisis is still there – England may be coming out, but the outcomes are still there – and in France and Spain, it feels even more so. Pressure is on the increase, through the crisis, through social media. It’s no longer about becoming more efficient. The problem is that we’re too efficient. Coaching needs to break the efficiency myth – of thinking that if you just push past a big hurdle [everything will be OK]. There is a limit to efficiency. We need reality based on work/life balance – understanding and respecting that – so we can come out of the circle and respect boundaries.

“That’s where I see the role of coaching – influencing the structure... helping people understand their preferences and what is and is not possible to change.” ■

● Join Dr Bonniwell on 13 November for *Coaching at Work’s* Coaching for Positive Leadership Masterclass www.coaching-at-work.com/masterclasses/

Further information

● Positran www.positran.fr/

● Strength Based Cards bit.ly/1p22VUN

● TedX: Dr Bonniwell on positive education bit.ly/1h5Kj4y

● VIA Strengths Directory www.viacharacter.org/www/